

Buying advice: PCs

Whether you're after a top-of-the-range machine or a more modestly specified, budget-price model, our *Buying advice* will guide you through the options available when looking for a new PC



Power PCs: £1,200+

- **Processor** The Athlon XP 2000+ is proving a real winner in the Power PC chart, comfortably outstripping the 2.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 for general Windows operation.
- **Memory** After a dip in prices, memory is now surging in value again. Even so, power users shouldn't settle for less than 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM.
- **Storage** The average user should be happy with 50 or 60GB, although 80 or 120GB will futureproof your PC. Look for a CD-R with at least 24-speed writing; for CD-RW recording, 10- or 16-speed is fine.
- **Monitor** Expect a top-quality 19in CRT (cathode ray tube) monitor with a dot pitch of at least 0.25mm and resolution support of up to 1,600x1,200. If you want to save desk space, a flat-panel is a viable option.
- **Graphics card** For top 3D performance, opt for the Ti 4400 or 4600 with 128MB of onboard memory. The GeForce3 Ti 500 is also a worthy budget contender.
- **Sound card** The Creative Audigy is the perfect choice, although the older Live 5.1 is still a high-quality card. The Cambridge SoundWorks/Creative family of speakers are both of the highest quality, and the Videologic generates thunderous audio.

Budget PCs: £700-£1,200

- **Processor** Again, the Athlon XP has taken over our Budget chart. At this price point, a 1700+ processor running at 1.4GHz is acceptable. Obviously, though, if you can scoop up a faster processor without losing out on the other components, do so.
- **Memory** Even in this category, 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM isn't out of the question. However, be careful that this isn't included at the expense of other components. Although 256MB is acceptable, make sure it is the faster DDR memory.
- **Storage** A 40GB hard drive will suffice, but this is now the average capacity. You should be able to get 60GB or, if you're really lucky, 80GB. A backup CD-RW drive is almost mandatory and should have minimum read/write/rewrite speeds of 32-/16-/10-speed.
- **Monitor** You are better off with a good 17in screen, which can reach a minimum resolution and refresh rate of 1,280x1,024 at 85Hz, than a poor 19in model. However, if you can find a decent 19in screen then snap it up.
- **Graphics card** Most Budget graphics cards can cope with pretty much anything these days, and only gaming connoisseurs will seek out the really high-end options. Aim for a card with at least 64MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and a minimum GeForce2 Titanium 200 chipset.
- **Sound card** Even in the Budget category the Audigy is starting to crop up. It's likely, though, that you'll end up with the trusty Creative SoundBlaster Live 5.1. Avoid onboard audio, unless it's the superb nForce Crush chipset from nVidia.



Superbudget PCs: under £700

- **Processor** Plenty of Superbudget PCs feature AMD's 1600+ processor, which is extremely fast. However, if performance isn't vital to you, see what sort of savings you might get by knocking it down to a 1.3GHz or 1.4GHz Athlon chip. Intel chips are a possibility, but will cost more resulting in a lower overall specification at this price point.
- **Memory** RAM prices are starting to rise, so you may pay more now, but still aim for 256MB. Pay a little extra now for the faster DDR (double data rate) RAM, rather than SDRAM, and your memory will hold its value better in the coming years.
- **Storage** Gigabytes abound these days, so demand no less than 30GB, with 40GB preferable. For smooth Windows operation, look for a motherboard that features an Ultra ATA-100 interface. A CD-RW drive is a must for the future – look for CD-R/RW performance of at least eight-speed.
- **Monitor** Don't let the manufacturer cut corners on the monitor – bear in mind that this is the one part of your PC that you'll be using continuously. Look for a 17in screen and a dot pitch of 0.25 or 0.24mm – although be aware that even screens with a higher dot pitch can produce a good image.
- **Graphics card** The nVidia GeForce2 Titanium cards are excellent value for money, with ATI Radeons and GeForce2 MXs also ideal alternatives under Windows XP.
- **Sound card** The Creative SoundBlaster Live 5.1 card is the perfect choice in this category. ■